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XXI.—PSYCHOLOGICAL REASONS FOR LESSING'S ATTITUDE TOWARD DESCRIPTIVE POETRY

In his discussion in *Laokoon* of the limits of poetry Lessing declares that detailed description of bodies in space is unpoetical.¹ He justifies his contention that progressive actions are the peculiar subject of poetry by reference (1) to the means of poetry² and (2) to the practice of Homer, all of whose descriptions he affirms are progressive.³ Many critics have not been satisfied with Lessing's limitation of poetry to progressive actions, and have attacked his conclusions by showing (1) that his conception of the means of poetry is inadequate, (2) that Homer contains a number of descriptions of objects in space. Taking as a starting point Lessing's position in regard to these descriptions, I think it possible to explain on a psychological basis the reason for Lessing's assertion that the poet would better not attempt to describe objects in space, except by the Homeric device of substituting progression for co-existence.

Lessing was not unaware of Homer's descriptions of objects in space: he mentions them, but denies that they form any obstacle to his theory, as they seem to him cases of the exception which proves the rule.⁴ He does not explain how these prove the rule; but one of his preliminary sketches⁵ throws some light on this point, altho only in regard to the description of the palace and gardens of Alcinous. Lessing here denies that Homer meant to describe co-existent objects; in regard to the palace he says that

¹ Kap. xvii, ed. Howard, New York, 1910, p. 110.

² Kap. xvi, ed. cit., p. 101.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁴ Kap. xviii, p. 113.

⁵ *Laokoon*, ed. Blümner, Berl., 1880, *Nachlass A*, 5, xli, p. 401.

Homer merely wished to convey an idea of its immensity. I will quote this description in order to show the possibility of a divergence of opinions on this point.

“ . . . a sheen as of the sun or moon played through the high-roofed house of the generous Alcinous. On either hand ran walls of bronze from threshold to recess, and round about the ceiling was a cornice of dark metal. Doors made of gold closed in the solid building. The doorposts were of silver and stood on a bronze threshold, silver the lintel overhead, and gold the handle. On the two sides were gold and silver dogs . . . Within were seats planted against the wall on this side and on that, from threshold to recess in long array ; and over these were strewn light fine-spun robes, the work of women. Here the Phæacian leaders used to sit, eating and drinking, holding constant cheer. And golden youths on massive pedestals stood and held flaming torches in their hands, to light by night the palace for the feasters.”¹

This description may very well give an impression of immensity, as Lessing declares ; to many people it gives more than that : it calls up a series of pictures of co-existent objects. Some readers have difficulty in uniting all the details into a single picture ; others do this with the greatest ease, as F. E. Bryant has pointed out.² One person whom I have questioned in regard to this says that she gets two final pictures, one of the exterior, one of the interior of the palace ; she starts with a general impression ; one detail after another adds itself until the final picture is the sum total of all ; she is not obliged consciously to renew any detail ; they remain in her picture without effort on her part. There would of course be a limit to the number of these details, just as there is a limit to the number of things that one can see at once in an actual picture ; but the description of the palace did not exceed the limit in her case. Other persons questioned maintain that they get a vague picture, but cannot see all the details at once ; others,

¹ *Odyssey*, transl. Palmer, Boston, 1900, VII, p. 102.

² *On the Limits of Descriptive Writing*, Ann Arbor, 1906, p. 38.

that they get no picture at all. Lessing seems to have got only an impression of immensity.

A difference of opinion as to the effect of verbal descriptions certainly exists. The scientific world of to-day explains this difference by the fact that there are various types of imagination. In Lessing's time the imagination was spoken of as if it were a faculty which all men possessed in the same way, and for which general rules could be laid down. Psychological investigation has shown that this is not true: that "there are imaginations, not 'the Imagination.'"¹ This fact has been recognized as playing an important part in the discussion of the value of verbal descriptions in poetry; it has also been used to show the falseness of Lessing's psychology of vision;² so far as I know, however, no attempt has been made to determine which type of imagination Lessing possessed, in order to show any effect which this might have on his theories about poetry.

A brief review of the types of imagination will make more clear the attempt to decide to which type Lessing belonged. Francis Galton was the first to show, in the year 1880, that persons differ in regard to their powers of mental imagery. He made the following experiment:

"I sent printed questions to a large number of people, making inquiries as to the illumination, definition and coloring of the mental image, supposing it to be the breakfast table. . . . The questions were framed thus:

"1. Illumination—Is the image dim or fairly clear? Is its brightness comparable to that of the actual scene?

"2. Are all the objects pretty well defined . . . ?

"3. Are the colors of the china, toast, mustard, parsley . . . quite distinct and natural?

"The earliest results of my inquiry amazed me. I had begun by questioning my friends in the scientific world, as they were the most likely class of men to give accurate answers concerning this faculty of visualizing.

¹ James, *Principles of Psychology*, New York, 1892, p. 304.

² F. E. Bryant, *op. cit.*

To my astonishment I found that the great majority of men of science to whom I first applied protested that mental imagery was unknown to them, and they looked on me as fanciful and fantastic in supposing that the words 'mental imagery' really expressed what I believed everybody to suppose them to mean. On the other hand, when I spoke to persons in general society I found an entirely different impression to prevail. Many men and a yet larger number of women, and many boys and girls, declared that they habitually saw mental imagery, and that it was perfectly distinct and full of color. I concluded that scientific men, as a class, have feeble powers of visual representation. There is no doubt whatever on the latter point, however it may be accounted for. My own conclusion is, that an overready perception of sharp mental pictures is antagonistic to the acquirement of habits of highly generalized and abstract thought, especially when the steps of reasoning are carried on by words as symbols, and that if the faculty of seeing pictures was ever possessed by men who think hard, it is apt to be lost by disuse."¹

It seems, therefore, that scientific men as a rule do not visualize easily. Lessing's remarks as to the impression which he receives from the description of the palace of Alcinous seem to indicate that he was not accustomed to visualizing. We have, moreover, direct proof that he could not call up a mental image at will, as he tries to do in response to Ariosto's description of Alcina.² It may be said that this is not the best poetry; it may also be said that no two persons would get the same image from Ariosto's description; but these two objections are here beside the point; we are merely endeavoring to ascertain what power of visualization Lessing possessed. I have ascertained by asking persons who visualize easily, that it is perfectly possible to obtain a unified picture containing all the details in this description. Other persons, who get various images of a beautiful woman, are satisfied with the pleasing effect thus produced. Lessing, however, says of this description: "Ich sehe bei dem Dichter nichts, und empfinde mit Ver-

¹ *Inquiries into the Human Faculty*, New York, 1883, pp. 83 ff.

² *Laokoon*, Kap. xx, ed. cit., p. 127.

druss die Vergeblichkeit meiner besten Anstrengung etwas sehen zu wollen."¹ He does not say that he sees parts, but is not able to unite them because the description is too long; he says, "I see nothing." This seems to me to indicate that his visualizing power was very low. He mentions again the difficulty of forming a mental image. "Der Maler, der nach Beschreibung eines Thomson eine schöne Landschaft darstellt, hat mehr getan, als der sie gerade von der Natur kopiert. Dieser sieht sein Vorbild vor sich; jener muss erst seine Einbildungskraft so anstrengen, bis er es vor sich zu sehen glaubt."² And again he says that even if the parts of a description remain in the memory, "welche Mühe, welche Anstrengung kostet es, ihre Eindrücke alle in eben der Ordnung so lebhaft zu erneuern, sie nur mit einer mässigen Geschwindigkeit auf einmal zu überdenken, um zu einem etwaigen Begriffe des Ganzen zu gelangen!"³ As I have pointed out, a good visualizer does not have to renew his impressions; once in the picture, they remain, altho the picture changes by the addition of new details.

Since Lessing attempts to call up mental images, we may assume that they were not entirely foreign to him. Either he once possessed the faculty of visualization, which he lost by disuse, as Galton suggests may be the case with many scientific men, or he may at times have had mental pictures, which were not under his control. Lessing speaks once of "seeing" in the description of Apollo and the pest: "Ich sehe ihn nicht allein herabsteigen, ich höre ihn."⁴ This may or may not mean that he had visual images occasionally. We cannot determine the exact grade of his visualizing power, nor is it necessary to do so; but I think we may

¹ *Laokoon*, Kap. xx, p. 130.

² *Ibid.*, Kap. xi, p. 86.

³ *Ibid.*, Kap. xvii, p. 108.

⁴ Kap. xiii, p. 95.

safely maintain that his visualizing power was weak and not under his control. There is a great difference between a person of this type and a person of the type which sees habitually vivid mental pictures, whenever picture-making words are used; and it is just this difference in visualizing power which causes the difference in opinion as to the effect of verbal descriptions. Moreover, this fact (for it seems to me that it may be called a fact) that Lessing visualized with great difficulty gives us a psychological explanation for his statement that speech, as the means of poetry, should not attempt "ein körperliches Ganze nach seinen Teilen zu schildern, weil dergleichen wörtlichen Schilderungen das Täuschende gebricht."¹ Since Lessing found nothing illusory in such descriptions, he rejected them, and attempted to justify this rejection by his theory as to the means of poetry and by an arbitrary selection of examples from Homer. Those, however, who disagree with him in his fundamental premise as to the effect of verbal descriptions will not necessarily accept his conclusion that these should be banished from poetry.

Lessing's statement that actions are the only proper subjects of poetry can also be explained on a psychological basis, by showing how this is also conditioned by his type of imagination. Up to the present the distinction has been made only between the visual and the non-visual types. In regard to the latter Royce mentions :

"Two types of persons . . . in whom some other form of sense imagery is more prominent than the visual imagery. These two types are (1) the auditory type, in whom images of sounds predominate, and (2) the motor type, perhaps better to be called the verbal-motor type, in whom the predominant imagery takes the form of images of movement, together with images partly motor in type, but also partly auditory, of words. The second of these types seems to be, at least under modern conditions of training and

¹Kap. xvii, p. 110.

in middle life, decidedly common, altho also decidedly inferior in number to the more or less skilful visualizers. . . . The motor type image their world especially in terms either of the movements that they themselves tend to make in the presence of things, or, in particular, in terms of the words which they use in naming and describing things." ¹

The auditory type seems to be rather rare. Musicians and actors belong to it generally.² Lessing says he hears Apollo descend,³ but this is not sufficient proof for us to decide that he belonged to the auditory type. There seems, however, to be very good reason for thinking that he was strongly of the verbal-motor type, as Royce calls it. In this type there are usually two factors present: (1) the images of movements; (2) the images of words. The second factor is dependent on the first, for it consists in a suppressed speech, that is, in suppressed muscle movements in the head or in the throat.⁴ In the case of concrete nouns and other image-forming words the verbal-motor type does not go beyond this feeling of the presence of the word itself, in suppressed muscle movements, and the knowledge of what the word means, while the visual type feels the word as subordinate to the image it raises. In abstract thinking, of course, all types may be satisfied with the mere knowledge of the meaning of the words; but we are here considering descriptive poetry, which must contain concrete nouns and descriptive adjectives. Lessing seems to have had this consciousness of words existing as symbols which he understood, but which meant nothing beyond to him, when he says that the poet fails unless he makes us more conscious of the object than of his words;⁵ and again: "[Wir wollen] . . . der Mittel, die der Poet anwendet, *seiner Worte*, bewusst zu sein aufhören."⁶

¹ *Outlines of Psychology*, New York, 1903, p. 156.

² James, *Psychology*, p. 306.

³ *Laokoon*, Kap. XIII, p. 95.

⁴ Titchener, *Primer of Psychology*, New York, 1900, p. 127.

⁵ *Laokoon*, Kap. XIV, p. 98.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Kap. XVII, p. 107.

Altho persons of the verbal-motor type think chiefly in words, yet, as Royce has said, they also "image their world in terms of movements that they themselves tend to make in the presence of things." These feelings of movements are most vividly present where verbs are used, or thought of. Professor Stricker of Vienna, who belongs to the motor type, has described his images of memory and imagination as follows :

"Wenn ich es versuche, die Gehbewegungen einer zweiten Person, sagen wir eines auf Commando marschierenden Soldaten, in meiner Erinnerung auftauchen zu lassen . . . und mir vorstellen will, wie er auf das Commando 'Marsch' ein Bein erhebt und vorwärts wirft, . . . dann merke ich, dass ich an einen meiner Oberschenkel erinnert werde. . . . Ich habe dabei den Eindruck, als wenn ich meinem Bilde helfen würde, die Bewegungen auszuführen. . . . Wenn ich mir das Bild eines Pferdes vorstelle, das eben an einem schweren Wagen zieht, knüpft sich daran ein Gefühl in der Brust- und Schultergegend." ¹

Those sensations which have been most vividly present in the consciousness are recalled again most readily. Galton cites the case of a young Indian,² who drew with the point of his knife the outlines of a figure, because, he said, he could then remember it better. Lessing seems to have had this experience, for he says: "Wir können uns überhaupt einer Bewegung leichter und lebhafter erinnern als blosser Formen oder Farben."³ This is not a mere general statement made by Lessing; it is a statement rising from his own experience, and he makes it very decidedly. Since we have shown that Lessing did not belong to the visual type, since we have no proof that he belonged to the auditory type (which occurs only rarely), since the general conditions of his life would seem to indicate that he was of the verbal-

¹Salomon Stricker, *Studien über die Bewegungsvorstellungen*, Wien, 1882, pp. 14-17.

²*Op. cit.*, p. 106.

³*Laokoon*, Kap. XXI, p. 134.

motor type, and since we have this direct proof in regard to his sensitiveness (1) to words, (2) to motions, are we not justified in assuming that he possessed the motor type of imagination?

The application of this assumption to his theory that actions are the only proper subjects of poetry remains to be made. When Lessing said that he wished to be raised above the words of the poet, he also explained how this was to be done. "Der Poet will nicht bloss verständlich werden, seine Vorstellungen sollen nicht bloss klar und deutlich sein; hiermit begnügt sich der Prosaist. Sondern er will die Ideen, die er in uns erweckt, so lebhaft machen, dass wir in der Geschwindigkeit die wahren sinnlichen Eindrücke ihrer Gegenstände zu empfinden glauben, und in diesem Augenblick der Täuschung uns der Mittel, die er dazu anwendet, seiner Worte, bewusst zu sein aufhören."¹ He therefore wishes to receive *sensations*, as we may translate "sinnliche Eindrücke," without saying to what particular sense we refer. Stricker has described his sensations of memory and imagination. He says further: "Ich kann mir ohne Zutun meines Muskelgefühls keine Veränderung in der Aussenwelt vorstellen. Wenn ich mir vorstellen will, dass ein gelber Körper blau wird, so kann ich das Gelb und Blau sehr wohl nacheinander vorstellen, ohne dabei an einen Muskel zu denken. Wie ich mir aber das Werden des Blau denken will, muss ich das Muskelgefühl zu Hilfe nehmen, und zwar geschieht es bei mir, wieder mit Hilfe der Augen oder der Hals-Nackermuskeln."² From any change in the outside world, then, Stricker receives sensations, "sinnliche Eindrücke." Lessing has emphasized the fact that the effect of the poetic picture lies in the succes-

¹ *Laokoon*, Kap. xvii, p. 107.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 18.

sion, in the change of events.¹ He also says: "Alles, was noch in dem Gemälde der Alcina gefällt und rührt, ist Reiz."² "Der Eindruck, den ihre Augen machen, kommt nicht daher, dass sie schwarz und feurig sind, sondern daher, dass sie mit Holdseligkeit um sich blicken, und sich langsam drehen."³

How are we to interpret the phrase "sinnliche Eindrücke," which Lessing said the poet should arouse, if not as the "arousing of muscular sensations by the presentation of advancing action"? I do not mean to say that Lessing had made it clear to himself that he had such muscle sensations, in observing or thinking of motions; such an analysis of his sensations long in advance of any experimental work on those lines is highly improbable; but only that he experienced an emotion or excitement, when actions were described, which he otherwise felt to be lacking. The objection may be made that "sinnliche Eindrücke empfinden" generally means, "to receive a visual image." This is only true because the majority of persons have the visual type of imagination. We are apt to interpret such an expression according to our own experience, without it ever occurring to us that it may mean something entirely different to another person. If we consider that for Lessing "sinnliche Eindrücke empfinden" here means "to receive a visual image," we find a flat contradiction between his advice to the poet in this case and his other statement as to the impossibility of getting a visual image: "Mehrere Teile oder Dinge, die ich notwendig in der Natur auf einmal übersehen muss, wenn sie ein Ganzes hervorbringen sollen, dem Leser nach und nach zuzählen, um ihm dadurch ein Bild von dem Ganzen machen zu wollen: heisst ein Eingriff

¹ *Laokoon*, Kap. xv, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

² "Reiz ist Schönheit in Bewegung," *ibid.*, Kap. xxi, p. 133.

³ *Ibid.*, Kap. xxi, p. 134.

des Dichters in das Gebiet des Malers, wobei der Dichter viel Imagination ohne allen Nutzen verschwendet."¹

On the other hand, this contradiction disappears, if we interpret the words "sinnliche Eindrücke empfinden" to mean "the experiencing of sensations *other than optical*"; if we make it more definite to mean "the experiencing of *muscular* sensation," we find a reason for Lessing's insistence on the necessity for action in poetry, and for his fondness for the Homeric device in description of substituting succession for co-existence. His statements that a poem must have advancing action, and that the effect on the hearer is caused by the succession of events strike as strange readers, who, like Herder, find the effect to lie in the power of the words to bring objects "gleichsam sichtlich vor die Seele."² Yet if Lessing received sensations and stimulation only through this succession, his theory that actions are the only proper subjects of poetry is at least subjectively justified.

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¹ *Ibid.*, Kap. XVIII, p. 114.

² *Erstes Wäldchen*, Kap. XI, in *Laokoon*, ed. cit., p. 242.